

# Resilience in the Face of Adversity: Narratives from Ageing Indigenous Women in Australia

Dune, T.<sup>1,2,3</sup>, Stewart, J.<sup>4</sup>, Tronc, W.<sup>5</sup>, Lee, V.<sup>6</sup>, Mapedzahama, V.<sup>7</sup>, Firdaus, R.<sup>1</sup> & Mekonnen, T.<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>School of Science and Health, Western Sydney University, Penrith NSW 2751, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Centre for Health research, Western Sydney University, Penrith NSW 2751, Australia

<sup>3</sup>School of Health, University of New England, Armidale NSW 2351, Australia

<sup>4</sup>True, Relationships and Reproductive Health, Maroochydore QLD 4558, Australia

<sup>5</sup>North Coast Aboriginal Corporation for Community Health, Birtinya, Qld 4575, Australia

<sup>6</sup>Faculty of Health Science, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

<sup>7</sup>Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

Correspondence: Tinashe Dune, School of Science and Health, Western Sydney University, Penrith NSW 2751, Australia.

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## Abstract

There is an increasing body of work identifying and analyzing notions of resilience from indigenous perspectives. Notwithstanding the utility of this research for the Australian context (some parallels may be cautiously inferred for some Indigenous Australian groups), critical knowledge gaps exist in our understanding of how Australian Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous women, construct, perform and express resilience. This paper addresses this gap by presenting data from focus group discussions with 11 Indigenous Australian women, which highlights how the women confront the everyday challenges of 'being Indigenous'. The women spoke of not only of a strong sense of identity in the face of negative stereotypes but also demonstrated their ability to adapt to change, rebound from negative historical socio-cultural and political systemic changes and ways to keep their identities and cultures strong within contemporary Australia. We contend that a focus on Indigenous resilience is more significant for social change because it not only moves away from deficit-discourses about Indigenous Australian groups, it highlights their remarkable strengths in adapting, recovering and continuing in white-centric, antagonistic conditions.

**Keywords:** resilience, Australia, racism, discrimination, ageing, indigenous women

## 1. Introduction

The consequences of colonization on Indigenous Australians, and its continued impact in their contemporary, everyday realities have been widely documented (Atkinson, 2002) (Carson, Dunbar, Chenhall, & Bailie, 2007; Lee, 2017b; Lomazzi, Theisling, Tapia, Borisch, & Laaser, 2013). A dominant thread in the literature on this subject focusses on the assault on indigenous power, status and autonomy (Baum, 2008; Carson et al., 2007; Hill, 2004; Lee, 2017b; Lomazzi et al., 2013; Marmot & Health, 2007; Tonkinson, 2007). This has resulted in a strong research concentration on the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in such areas as health, education, housing, employment, and income (Baum, 2008; Carson et al., 2007; Fredericks, Lee, Adams, & Mahoney, 2015; Lee, 2017b; Lomazzi et al., 2013; Walter & Saggars, 2007). While significant for highlighting Indigenous stereotypes in Australia, we contend that this focus also inadvertently perpetuates at-risk and deficit-driven discourses and their associated myths of the 'problematic' Indigenous subject (Bamblett, 2011; Fogarty, Riddle, Lovell, & Wilson, 2017; Ford, Harris III, Webb, & Jones, 1994). It has been noted that "when a group is primarily described in relationship to problems, this deficit portrayal can stigmatize and further marginalize groups...[hence, it is more useful to] focus on resilience, which is thought to have a long-term positive impact on indigenous populations" (Burnette, 2014, p. 1).

For indigenous women, the situation is magnified, because, as Burnette notes, "Indigenous women are distinct from other minorities, in that they have experienced patriarchal colonialism, which includes the multiple burdens of

colonialism, racism, and sexism” (2014, p. 2). Historically, Indigenous women have carried a significant share of the burden of colonization, thus the prevailing social, political and cultural realities of Indigenous women resulting in the experience of oppression (Carson et al., 2007; Kirmayer, Marshall, & Phillips, 2011; Lee, 2017b). The past few decades have seen some growth in literature on Indigenous women’s realities in Australia. Much of this literature has focused on exploring multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage that Indigenous women encounter in various arenas. Such examples include disparities in health, and the realities of poor health and wellbeing (e.g., disparities in health, and the realities of poor health and wellbeing, see Dudgeon et al., 2016; Lee, 2017b; Lomazzi et al., 2013; Reading & Wien, 2009; Williams & Mohammed, 2009); experiences of domestic violence (Atkinson, 2007; Nancarrow, 2006; Nowra, 2007); and increased incarceration of Indigenous women (Cunneen, 2001; LaPrairie, 2002). Inevitably, the dominant scholarship that emerges from this focus tends to portray Indigenous women as primarily disempowered subjects of discrimination. Notwithstanding the utility of this literature in exposing the condition of Indigenous women in Australia, what is overlooked (at worst) and de-emphasized (at best) is Indigenous women’s agency and resilience and the important contributions they make to their own communities and broader society (Dune et al., 2017; Lee, 2017b). Scarpino notes that “research has silenced the voices of Aboriginal women by using Western concepts and constructs that have maintained colonialism through a negative portrayal of Aboriginal women” (2007b, p. 33).

This study presents a different perspective from the literature discussed above: it overwhelmingly shows that the everyday realities of Indigenous women are also defined by multiple forms of resilience. This is not a particularly unique finding. Other commentators have noted that “women are considered the ‘backbone’ of the Aboriginal family, and it is evident that many demonstrate strength in coping and in assisting family members to deal with adversity” (Goin & Mill, 2013, p. 485). We acknowledge that such research has aim to prioritise the voices of Indigenous women, in ways that necessarily expose their strength and resilience (Lee, 2017a) (Hughes, 2013). However, resilience has not been an explicit focus of such research. While there is work emerging out of North America specifically exploring indigenous resilience, or applying it as a framework for understanding specific social phenomena (Andersson, Shea, Amaratunga, McGuire, & Sioui, 2010; Burnette, 2014; Fleming & Ledogar, 2008a, 2008b; Ledogar & Fleming, 2008), indigenous women’s voices have thus far been largely missing (Scarpino, 2007b) and for this paper in particular it is the Indigenous Australian women’s voices that are missing. As Burnette notes, to date “the resilience of indigenous women has been glaringly underrepresented in research” (2014, p. 2).

The women’s narratives in this research reveal the characteristics of resilient women as articulated by Goin and Mill (2013: 486)

*Resilient women are characterized by: an active approach to solving life’s problems; an ability to perceive experiences constructively even if these experiences have caused pain and suffering; an ability to gain other people’s positive attention and support; a network of supportive adults with- in or outside the family; and a strong reliance on faith to maintain a positive view of a meaningful life.*

We would argue then, that the notion of *survivance*, used to describe the resilience of indigenous North Americans would apply to the indigenous women from this study. Survivance describes indigenous people’s “ability to transcend the colonial efforts to subjugate and erase them by highlighting their active presence and ingenuity when faced with adversity, as demonstrated by attributes including humor, courage, and strength of spirit” (Burnette, 2015)

In this paper we take a step towards addressing this research gap, and in doing so we take our lead from the research approach outlined by Andersson et al. (2010, p. 3):

*A resilience focus counters a dominant research trend of “what is wrong” in Aboriginal communities; it ensures research is framed in a positive manner and results in practical benefits for Aboriginal peoples. This shift has several effects: it increases relevance and acceptability of the research to Aboriginal peoples, and it increases immediacy of solutions.*

What is unique about this paper is that the resilience of Indigenous Australian women is given preeminence, as a topic in and of itself. Like other commentators, we consider the “presence of some demonstrable substantial [challenge] to be essential to the very concept of resilience” (Ledogar & Fleming, 2008, p. 25). As such, while we present data on the challenges of racism and discrimination, as experienced by our research participants, we do so in order to provide the context for an in-depth discussion of the women’s resilience. The data we present in this paper will demonstrate an extraordinary and enduring ability to not only subsist but even flourish despite such challenges.

### *1.1 Resilience: The Concept*

The term resilience emerged as a social theory term in the 1970s (Holling, 1973) initially out of psychiatry, where it was applied as a framework for analyzing and understanding “why some children raised in conditions of high adversity were coping better than others” (Tousignant & Sioui, 2009, p. 46). Since then it has been used in other social science

disciplines. However, attempts at a coherent definition have been illusive and there is variation amongst scholars' use of the term (McGuire-Kishebakabaykwe, 2010, p. 120). As a (social) psychology and psychiatry term then, resilience would be interpreted as an individual trait and thus would vary amongst individuals (some individuals have that characteristic and others do not). As Goin and Mill (2013, p. 486) note, "a resilient individual has an inner strength that helps her to bounce back from the problems that would seem to lead to certain failure". It is therefore important for us to clarify what we mean by 'resilience' and how we use it as a framework for understanding ageing Australian Indigenous women's everyday realities. We apply the term here according to its most basic meaning, as "positive adaptation despite adversity" (Fleming & Ledogar, 2008a, p. 7). In other words, resilience is "a dynamic process of adjustment, adaptation and transformation in response to challenges and demands" (Kirmayer et al., 2011, p. 85). McGuire-Kishebakabaykwe also notes that the common meaning is "the ability to rebound from challenges in everyday life" and to recover from and survive adversarial conditions (2010, p. 120). In this sense, resilience refers to the ability to do well, or subsist in spite of the challenges or obstructions that one faces (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

While this may be true for psychology, applying the term to indigenous communities necessitates a broadening of the concept to refer to "more than just [individual] traits or behavior... [understanding it instead as] a complex interplay of social, cultural, and behavioural factors that operate at individual, family, and community levels" (Andersson et al., 2010, p. 62). The resilience highlighted in this paper is not only of (individual) Indigenous women, but also of Indigenous communities that continue to demonstrate a capacity to "absorb disturbance, withstand shocks, and re-organize so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks" (Lu, 2010, p. 7).

### 1.2 Resilience: The Framework

In the absence of a framework for resilience specific to the context of Indigenous Australian women, we adopt the resilience model proposed by Scarpino (2007b, pp. 40-41). Considering it inappropriate to adopt and apply a 'Western' definition of resilience to indigenous experiences (see for example, Scarpino, 2007a), thereby potentially advancing the colonial project, we chose Scarpino's model which instead,

*mak[es] use of Aboriginal knowledge and wisdom that already exists in the Medicine Wheel [to] focus on the process of interconnectiveness and dependence between individual, family, community, Nations, the natural world, and the Creator in the form of circles within circles.*

While the Medicine Wheel as a cultural symbol is specific to North American Indigenous groups (where, even so, it is interpreted and represented in various ways), as a metaphor it can be applied to Indigenous Australian populations: "the underlying web of meaning ... remains the same: the importance of appreciating and respecting the ongoing interconnectedness and interrelatedness of all things" (Bell, 2014).

Scarpino's model of resilience, adapted from the Medicine Wheel (Fig. 1), emphasizes all key areas of resilience evident in the narratives of the women interviewed for this study: mental, spiritual (rooted in culture), emotional (rooted in culture, family and community) and physical (including connection to land). For us, then, Scarpino's model offers a framework to focus on the interconnectedness of the various aspects of indigenous women's socio-cultural, spiritual and political environments. From our research participants' responses, it is clear that family, family relationships, culture, and cultural pride and identity play a central role in the women's lives, such that we cannot conceive of a notion of resilience that does not allow for those interconnections. This is fitting with (Goin & Mill, 2013) 's explanation that Indigenous perspectives of resilience "combine the interplay between spirituality, family strength, Elders, ceremonial rituals, oral traditions, tribal identity, support networks and their relationship to the land" (2013, p. 486).

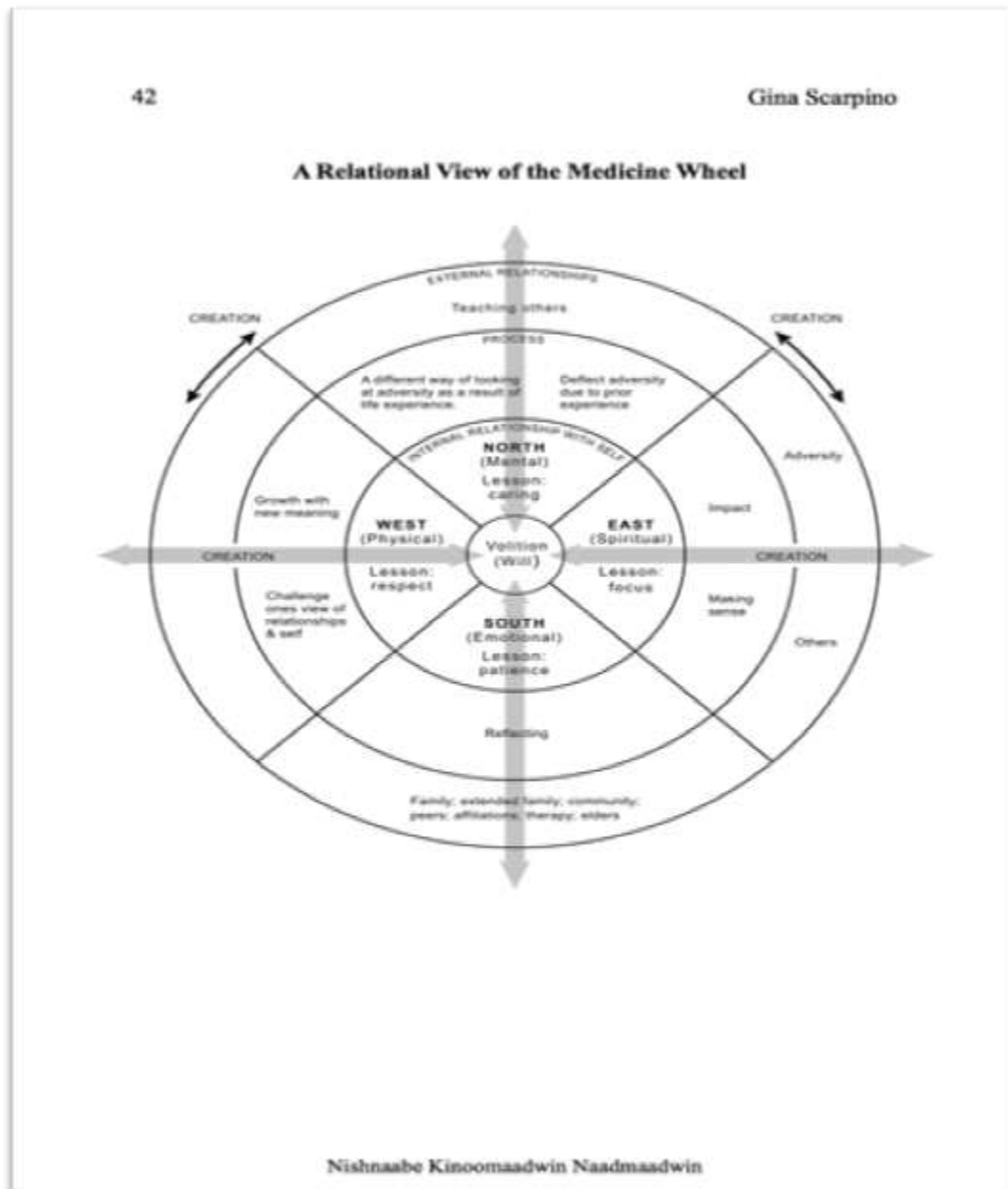


Figure 1. A Relational View of the Medicine Wheel (Scarpino, 2007)

## 2. Methods and Methodology

This research investigating Indigenous women's resilience was part of a larger exploratory study that sought to understand how ageing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women living in Australia constructed gender, ageing and Indigeneity. The current project engaged qualitative design, drawing on principles of feminist methodology in which the voices of women as knowers were centred and captured within focus groups settings (Olesen, 2011). The capturing of Indigenous women's voices is not a form of control it is more the opposite. It is a process of encouraging the sharing of Indigenous ways of doing, knowing and being through oral communication so that stories and knowledge are shared collectively so as to benefit others (Morseu-Diop, 2008). Such methodology has proved successful in garnering phenomenological experiences from women of various backgrounds and was therefore the methodology of choice for this exploratory study (Dune et al., 2017; Dune et al., 2018; Dune, Mapedzahama, Minichiello, Hawkes, & Pitts, 2015; Fileborn, Thorpe, Hawkes, Minichiello, & Pitts, 2015).

Data collection was conducted in March 2014 on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland and consisted of fourteen women across three focus groups. The focus groups took from two and a half to three hours each to complete. This was more time than initially predicted but proved necessary to allow all members to disclose central aspects of their cultural

identity (including the researchers') and the use of in-depth stories and anecdotes to embed the women's (as well as the researchers') constructions and understandings of Indigeneity, racism, discrimination, and resilience from their sociocultural context (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010). Thus the focus groups organically took on the following format as described by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010), 40-41):

- *Social yarning (before the topic yarn, when a connection is established and trust is usually developed).*
- *Research topic yarning (relaxed but purposeful, to gather information related to the research topic).*
- *Collaborative yarning (sharing information, exploring ideas in explaining new topics, leading to new understandings).*
- *Therapeutic yarning (when the participant discloses information that is traumatic, or intensely personal and emotional. The researcher leaves the research topic to become a listener)*

This organic addition of the yarning method to feminist methodology helped establish a deep sense of rapport between all the women involved (including the researchers); a supportive environment was created in which the women could share very intimate and sensitive information and be received with empathy and understanding.

Focus group discussions primarily explored the women's perspectives on what it is like being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander woman in contemporary Australia and how this had changed over time and across generations. The current paper presents the data pertaining to these experiences, as well as the role of cultural identity and pride as a means for catalysing resilience.

### 2.1 Data Analysis

The data were thematically analysed by identifying topics and substantive categories within participants' accounts in relation to the study's objectives. In addition, Quirkos was used to ascertain topical responses and emergent substantive categories, coding particularly for word repetition, direct and emotional statements and discourse markers including intensifiers, connectives and evaluative clauses. Quirkos is a qualitative analysis software for coding and exploring text with graphical visualisation (Saldaña, 2015).

### 2.2 Recruitment

Participants were recruited via plain-English advertisements sent to women via a number of organisational mailing lists, including Family Planning Queensland (FPQLD) and the North Coast Aboriginal Corporation for Community Health (NCACCH). Convenience from personal contacts and snowballing sampling were also used to recruit participants.

### 2.3 Research Partnerships

A common experience is that while researchers gather data, publish their findings and improve their research track record, no actual benefit is received by the communities/people being researched, which often leads to a distrust of researchers perceived as implicit agents of colonisation (Pyett, Waples-Crowe, & van der Sterren, 2008). In this research this was in some way mitigated by employing the yarning and feminist methods as well as the academic researcher (TD) taking a supportive, versus lead, role in the development of the recruitment process, the selection of times (and being flexible about when focus groups began and ended) as well as the selection of where focus groups were held. In addition, all documents (Participant Information Sheet and Consent Forms) and data collection tools (demographic questions and focus group topic guide) were developed and finalised in collaboration with the organisational research officers from FPQLD and NCACCH. Further, within the focus groups the women were encouraged to ask questions (which they did), of each other and the academic researcher, as well as the organisational Research Officers. As indicated by Bessarab and Ng'andu (2010, p. 47) the yarning methods' "strength is in the cultural security that it creates for Indigenous people participating in research. Yarning is a process that cuts across the formality of identity as a researcher... both are learners in the process".

### 2.4 Ethics

Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of New England's Human Research Ethics Committee and ethical clearance was also provided by Family Planning Queensland and NCACCH.

### 2.5 Sample

Recruitment resulted in a sample of eleven women, between the ages of 42 and 73 (see Table 1). All but one (South Sea Islander) of the women identified as Aboriginal and originated from a variety of mobs across Australia. All but one woman had children and the majority had three or more. The majority of the women had a number of grandchildren and one woman indicated her great grand and step great grandchildren as well. The participants' marital status was mixed with three married, four single, two in de facto relationships, one divorced and one widowed. Considering the age of the women who participated in the research a majority had completed menopause with only a couple going through

menopause at the time of the focus groups. Their highest level of education was mixed with some not having finished primary and/or secondary school and others who had completed tertiary studies (e.g., diploma, certificate, undergraduate degree). Most of the women were employed or engaged in an occupation with seven indicating that their work was fulltime, two-part time, one retired and one unemployed. It is also noted that, apart from the retired and unemployed women whose occupational history is unknown, the women in this research were engaged in occupations which, in some way, revolved around the biopsychosocial aspects of health and wellbeing, with at least four of the women specialising in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health care (Table 1).

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Mob/Clan	Number and age of children	Marital Status	Highest level of education	Occupation (FT/PT)	Stage of Menopause
Taylor	42	Aboriginal	Gureng Gureng	3 (26, 23, 21) + 2 grandchildren	De Facto	Year 11	Admin (Indigenous Health) (FT)	N/A
Kylie	N/A	Aboriginal	N/A	2 (23, 24)	Married	Diploma	Health (FT)	Peri
Mary	46	Aboriginal	Mudburra/Ncari nman	3 (22, 19, 13)	De Facto	Undergrad Degree	Aboriginal Mental Health Nurse (PT)	N/A
Sue	50	Aboriginal	Gungarri/Bidjara	N/A	Single	Undergrad Degree	Health Worker	Post
Gindee	53	Aboriginal	Ngombuvv	2 (23, 19)	Single	Undergrad Degree	Generalist (FT)	Post
Bronte	57	Aboriginal	N/A	2 (37, 32) + 4 grandchildren	Widowed	Technical	Retired	Post
Cassie	58	Aboriginal	Gangarri	3 (39, 35, 32) + 9 grandchildren	Divorced	Year 10	Unemployed	Post
Possum	58	Aboriginal	Wiradjuri	5 (41, 38, 36, 35, 32) + 17 grandchildren	Single	Undergrad Degree	Aboriginal Mental Health Nurse (FT)	Post
Lillie Rose	65	Aboriginal	Dighelli	2 (39, 38) + 7 grandchildren	Married	Year 11	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker (FT)	Post
Jabby	70	Aboriginal/South Islander	Kabbi Kabbi	3 (47, 45, 41) + 5 grandchildren	Single	Year 5/6	Carer (FT)	Post
Majya	73	Aboriginal	Iman/Gureng Gureng	4 (52, 51, 49, 45) + 9 grand + 8 great grand + 4 step great grandchildren	Married	Cert III Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander & Education Support	Teacher Aide (PT)	Post

### 3. Results

The women's responses to the probe: *"What is it like being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander woman in Australia?"* produced new insights into everyday realities and understandings of ageing indigenous women in the context of racism and discrimination. These understandings are reflected in their deep sense of cultural pride and resilience across time and over generations. In line with the yarning and feminist methodology the results are presented at length along with their stories and/or groups discussions to appropriately contextualise and give voice to the women's perspectives. In order to fully unpack Australian indigenous women's resilience, we start with a discussion of the social, political and cultural adversities that the women face. As our discussion of these adversities highlights they are rooted in the colonial era and have continuities to Indigenous women's contemporary lives. The following sections outline the two major themes which came out of the focus groups: 1) the challenges and 2) resilient women, resilient communities. Readers are advised that the following women's story contain personal experiences that may cause distress.

#### 3.1 The Challenges

From the outset, the women's responses were embedded within a historical understanding of Indigenous and contemporary Australia. The women's subjective experiences and understandings of being Indigenous were influenced by a colonial history described in terms of external perspectives of Indigeneity (*From the Outside In*) and experiences of discrimination.

##### 3.1.1 From the Outside In

For some of the women being an ageing Indigenous woman was in part defined by the experiences of their grandparents.

*So my grandmother was 16 ... when she was taken by my grandfather and my grandfather was 45 years older than her so he was 69 when my father was born and he was 96 when he passed away. He was 96.*

*But he was a very wealthy property owner in [name of town] and he had a family, a wife with 8 children and he left them and went to [name of town] on Christmas Day, and it's all recorded and he took my grandmother when she was 16 and he took her, it was through the depression... (Nambour)*

Although large age differences were not uncommon between a husband and his first wife, nor were practices of wife stealing or wife swapping (Jankowiak, Sudakov, & Wilreker, 2005). But these transactions were all conducted within culturally bound rules and laws involving negotiation, reciprocal exchange and punishment (Douglas, 2005). Further, Indigenous women had agency and strategies for ensuring certain outcomes within Indigenous cultures (Foley, 2003). The issue alluded to by the participant in Nambour was that the “taking” of a young Indigenous woman by an older (presumably) White man played out in the context of very different power dynamics and relations. These dynamics were not only evident between White men and Indigenous women, but also, in the background to this quote, there is the participant’s Indigenous family/community - men and women - who have been stripped of all power to negotiate, prevent or punish the white man’s actions (Moore & Scraton, 2014).

The perceived value of women was a common theme in the participant’s comments. Another participant expounded on examples of sexual coercion and abuse as an indicator of the historical and non-Indigenous perspective of Indigenous women’s worth.

*And it's like that for a lot of Aboriginal women who are sexually abused. Not just by family, not just by a family member or a community member but by non-Indigenous people. A lot of Aboriginal girls were just taken off and just sexually abused and dumped on the side of the road... (Nambour)*

Although the value of Indigenous women seemed clear to the women what constituted Indigeneity and how this was decided and defined was contentious. The women’s experiences highlighted the complicated intersection between how you see/experience yourself, the construction of your own identity, in relation to how you see yourself through other peoples’ eyes.

*Well I find it hard for me because where do I fit in. My problem is I'm not black enough and I'm not white enough. That's always my problem. Where do I fit it? (Maroochydore)*

*It depends on your skin colour. If you're fair then they just go 'why do you identify as Aboriginal because you're really fair and you could pass as White'. Then you go 'I don't wanna pass off as a White person'. (Nambour)*

The women reflected on Indigenous identification in light of the politics of authenticity as well as who decides and according to what definitions.

*W1: So yeah, to the point where we've gotta have Aboriginal certificates to say that we are from Aboriginal backgrounds...*

*Moderator: How do you feel about that?*

*W2: I think it's degrading...it's degrading.*

*W1: So the White man still rules.*

*W3: And even for our children. When our children go for jobs, and it's coming into health now, where you have to have an Aboriginal identification or certificate to get that job.*

*W2: Even in education*

*All: YES!*

*W3: In any department.*

*W1: They've got to prove they're Aboriginal. Why would anybody, given the way Aboriginal people are treated and spoken about, why would anyone in their right mind want to identify as an Aboriginal person that's not. Given that there is so much racism out there.*

*W2: Some people do because they think you get special treatment or benefits if you claim you're Aboriginal. (Nambour)*

The women in Nambour clearly articulate the flow on effect of having to prove one’s Indigeneity across all aspects of life and across generations. The effects were also expressed when the women described what ideas they have encountered from non-Indigenous Australia(ns) in their day to day lives.

*Moderator: What do they think you get?*

*W1: free health care, more money, money to go to school, special benefits, pay for your kids to go through school.*

*W4: There was a staff member at Gympie hospital who had a situation where they rang her, and she's a young one, and they said 'well, don't you all get free cars? Why can't you get the script done?' She said 'I don't get free cars and I don't know where you live but that doesn't happen in my world!'*

*W2: Well that doesn't happen in mine either!*

*All: [Laughter]*

*W1: People think that Aboriginal people get everything for free*

*W3: So it was the hospital staff that said it to her?*

*W4: Yes!*

*W3: So there is still that cultural practice where people in health services believe this stuff.*

*W2: We used to get phone calls from Nambour General Hospital for clients that didn't have any personal hygiene stuff, like toothpaste or a toothbrush, who needed money for cigarettes, needed money for whatever... Well don't ring us like we're the Commonwealth Bank. We'd buy it out of our own pocket. I was lucky I then got involved with an organisation that actually set up some hygiene packs for hospitals and they'd give them for free. (Nambour)*

As explained by the women, inaccurate perceptions about what Indigenous life is like is perpetuated by the media.

*You know in that story they might have an Aboriginal man that did this or an Aboriginal woman that did this last night but they won't tell you about the 15 White fellas that did the same thing. They'll just talk about that one Aboriginal person that did it. (Nambour)*

*W1: What you see is elderly women still sitting on rocks still sitting on the grass around a campfire doing nothing and if there's anything to do with the young fellas, it's always put out there "these young fellas are running around being little mongrels" but you don't see the good.*

*Moderator: Why would they prefer that because clearly there's other stories as well to tell?*

*W1: They're leaving us back there. It doesn't promote the moving forward of the Indigenous people. (Gympie)*

As can be seen in the quote from Gympie age plays a part in constructions of Indigeneity. This was expanded upon by women from Nambour who spoke about the intersection between external perceptions of ageing and Indigeneity.

*Moderator: How about an image of women who are over 40, over 50?*

*W4: Well you might as well be dead because you haven't got nothing in your head. As you get older you get dismissed.*

*W1: I know it personally because it happens to me every day and I make a point of making my point.*

*W2: Up until about 15 years ago the life expectancy of an Aboriginal woman was between 44 and 48. Life expectancy of an Aboriginal man was 40 to 42. So they were considered...*

*W3: Well we were never included in anything because we were all gonna be dead! (Nambour)*

Participants also noted positive representations of Indigenous Australians within contemporary media.

*It's amazing the number of people who were texting me and emailing me and saying "I just saw the most amazing drama series, have you seen it". So if it continues because it's the top actors and directors and producers, really clever type of people and it shows real people, I mean urban but it shows really strong women. (Maroochydore)*

However, the women felt that such programming was only preaching to the converted.

*But how many people are going to sit there and go "oh yeah, NITV, indigenous TV, oh no, don't want to watch that". (Maroochydore)*

Messages which reinforce historical and continued vilification of Indigenous people outweighed the positive messages. Another participant reflected on representations they felt were at odds with an appreciation of the impact of historical factors on the experience of Indigeneity.

*Non-indigenous people say [Indigenous] people need to just get over it. Yeah, move on. Yeah, that's what they put in the media. So the media actually fuels this idea ... Fuels that and maintains that racism... today they're [Anglo-Australians] saying still that it's not them that did the hurt, that's in the past.*



*Well they're [Anglo-Australians] still celebrating the past too...it's still like there's no moving ahead for us. (Maroochydore)*

### 3.1.2 Racism and Discrimination

Although questions with regards to racism and discrimination were not explicitly asked the women's understandings of being Indigenous were very much steeped in such experiences. Notably they introduced the long history of racism and discrimination towards Indigenous people in Australia and discussed the ways in which they demonstrated resilience.

The manifestations of racism and discrimination were described in the context of the invasion of Australia by the Europeans through to the present day. These included murder, rape, physical abuse, psychological abuse, vilification, segregation and exclusion and were the result of policies which supported prejudice. The perspectives of the women were expressed with anger, grief, resignation, sadness, determination and power. Although every woman, across all focus groups, made comments which could fit within this, the perspectives of the women in Nambour highlight the range and longitudinal nature of this history. Considering the breadth of examples this section presents them such that the context in which they occurred it understood and given voice.

*And like my people, they were all killed anyhow. All the La Perouse, Botany Bay people all along the coast of New South Wales and that's when the Irish came. Hence, there's a lot of Irish because they came in and they were the big abusers in those days and were allowed to do whatever they wanted to do so many of us are mixed up with that. And my Auntie used to tell me that when they were on the river washing, all the women would be washing, the soldiers would come and rape the young girls. So since we were babies... (Nambour)*

*Well for a lot of us were raped. A lot of our young girls at the age of 12 were put out on the mines for the miner's pleasure, were put out on farms for the farm-hands' and the farmer's pleasure and that's why, and my grandmother was one of them and that's why she ended up with a man that was 45 years older than her. (Nambour)*

*That's what I was saying in there before is that it depends on what happened to you in your childhood cause this is confidential, my name won't be disclosed. I was abducted by two white 17 year old males when I was 7 and I was taken out into the bush and I was sexually abused and sexually abused. I was made to feel it was my fault my whole life [crying]. That's why I can't feel good about myself [crying] [assistant moderator hugging participant][pausing]. (Nambour)*

The women reflected on the history of European invasion and prejudicial policies where Indigenous people and especially women had little autonomy or value within a White Australia(n) context.

*But when you come from a mission and you've got White missionaries dictating to you so you know you're Black. You've been ostracised all your life. So our lot and our mothers grew up with that and they found someone to love 'em. Cause at the end of the day the missionaries beat 'em. Like they weren't allowed to marry and the missionaries told them who they're going to marry. So my Mum was 13 when she was forced to marry, she was a kid. So of course that marriage broke down because he's thinking 'Hey this is good' and he's going out with all her other friends and the marriage broke down. So she was supposed to marry a bloke from Alice Springs, another Aboriginal fella. So it wasn't like how me and you go out there and find love and all that bliss. Nah! They were forced to marry so then that broke down and then a lot of those men left those women with all the kids. They shunned the responsibility. So then when they had a White fella love them for who they are they accepted that. You gotta remember, back in that day when our Mum's were growing up there was no pension so they had to hook up with a fella to support 'em. To bring us kids up. So within that that racial torment just kept going, spiralling out of control. (Nambour)*

*Back in those days I know that if Grandma wanted to take the kids into town he had the permit so until he come home from work she wasn't allowed to leave the boundaries of the yard. So if the kids got sick she had to wait until he came home to go and visit the doctor. She wasn't even allowed into the corner store and they lived next to the corner store. She had to go behind, through the back door, to get anything from the store and only because she had a good relationship with the owner. They weren't allowed to walk into the front of that store. It was illegal. (Nambour)*

These sanctions supported the removal of children from Indigenous mothers and families and segregation in public life.

*W1: And we were still sending the babies to Camperdown, this was the last baby we sent, for adoption away from their mothers because they had too many kids and they couldn't look after the baby cause the babies were coming back in. And the last one would have been in '68 '69.*

W2: *But that was an assumption that non-Indigenous people made for Indigenous people.*

W4: *...They had too many children and hygiene mightn't have been up to their standard. Health – they might get recurring parasites and scabies. We'd clean 'em up then they'd go back home and they'd come back again. So they'd say 'Ah well, they can't look after them so we'll remove them'. They became state wards. Wards of the State.*

W3: *Remember in the 50s and 60s they had the White policies...*

All: *Oh yeah! (Nambour)*

W4: *Well it's better now than it was. When I started my nursing in 1968 we had a black ward. We had an entry for the women in the section for the Black women to come and have their babies...*

W2: *Yeah they weren't allowed in the same area.*

W4: *So all that stuff in the States with the Black toilets...we had the same out here still in 1968.*

W3: *You had to get permission to get married as well.*

W1: *It was still happening in the 70s. It makes your eyes water. It's just so frustrating... (Nambour)*

This segregation was also present in schools and leisure activities with longitudinal effects on the women's self-esteem.

W1: *Many challenges were thrown at us. 'You're a Black fella get over there you're not mixing with us'...*

All: *[Agreeing]*

W2: *In [place, place] you would just get called a little Abo and you couldn't be around the White kids, you couldn't sit where the White kids sat you couldn't play with the White kids even though your friends were White.*

All: *[Agreeing]*

Moderator: *What does that mean for you as you aged?*

W1: *I think it affects your self-esteem for the rest of your life.*

W2: *It does wear down your self-esteem. My life would have been totally different and I know that for a fact had I had self-worth and self-esteem. (Nambour)*

*I know with me, you were made to be ashamed of who you are because your colour. Even when you went to school you were treated differently. (Gympie)*

These political and societal manifestations of prejudice were also present in some families where fathers were White Australians (Atkinson, 1990, 2002, 2007; McGrath, 1984).

W2: *Yes, racism...*

W1: *And also when your Mum went out with a White fella he didn't respect your Aboriginality.*

Moderator: *What do you mean?*

W1: *Like he would...he was a right bastard. And he used to beat you down...*

All: *[Agreeing]*

W1: *Yeah! 'You little bastards, get away'.*

Moderator: *Really?!*

All: *Yeah!*

Moderator: *But he was dating your mother.*

All: *Yeah! (Nambour)*

Whilst acts of racism and discrimination are not explicitly applied they continue to manifest in implicit, but equally, deleterious ways.

W3: *Yes! There is a lot of racism.*

W2: *It happens at the shops. People follow me around or follow my kids around.*

W1: *Yeah, you'll walk in and if you're with a couple of dark skinned Murri's... 'Aisle 2, check aisle 2'*

All: *[Laughing] Really?!*

All: *Yes!! Yes!!*

W1: *Or they'll stand there like this mucking around with the shelves. You've gotta walk in their shoes to understand.*

W3: *You have to! (Nambour)*

The relentless nature of the prejudice experienced by these Indigenous women is again tied to policies which reinforce the need to prove one's Indigeneity even when doing so is not explicitly necessary.

*Any other culture but Aboriginal. And I just think it's really, really sad considering that we are the first. Our ancestors are the first people of Australia and we are still the first people of Australia. So, you know, for us to walk around with this bloody piece of paper to say 'Hey, I'm Aboriginal'. I went to Centrelink one day with my daughter and the lady said to my daughter 'where is your Aboriginality certificate?' and I said 'Well where is your Australian certificate mate?' And she goes 'excuse me?' And I said 'did you just realise what you said to me? So you can shut your mouth and get me the Social Worker.' I said 'people come in here to see ordinary Australians, they don't need to be, there's a line up and you absolutely attacked her. Are you stupid?' I said 'Where is your Australian certificate to say that you're Australian?' 'Cause you didn't come from here I can tell you right now. Now you show some respect.' And she was like 'Oh!' and I said 'I don't want to talk to you. Get someone else'. Because when you put it back on them they think they're so smart saying 'Where's your Aboriginality certificate', 'You've got to prove who you are'. I said 'well where's yours?' She's going 'Sorry? I don't need one'. I said 'well nor do I'. But I know who I am do you know who you are?' So there are all these challenges as mothers and grandmothers for our kids because we're still fighting that battle. (Nambour)*

Although all the women have experienced, and continue to experience, racism and discrimination in various forms their stories were told alongside a powerful resilience.

### 3.2 Resilient Women, Resilient Communities

The women demonstrated a strong sense of conviction with regards to maintaining their sense of self and culture and to fight for what they believed was important to all Indigenous people. This was noted as a feature of all Indigenous generations which had long standing origins.

W2: *You gotta remember that the Stolen Generation comes into play here too because my mother was a Stolen Generation.*

W1: *Mine too...*

W2: *So you know...*

W4: *Every generation prior to us here today have fought harder than what we're fighting now.*

All: *Yes!*

W1: *They fought the hard fight for what we have today.*

W2: *And we just keep fighting. I think for women and men we don't lay down and die. We keep focussing on the fact that we are Aboriginal. We are the first people of this Nation and we are to be respected. We let people know when they're not being appropriate. (Nambour)*

Again, policies which dictated the lives of Indigenous people featured in discussions which demonstrated Indigenous resilience. The next quote for instance details the ways in which one woman's family and community dealt with the practices of the Stolen Generations and the way in which she stood up for herself and her friends when being discriminated against.

*It wasn't something we cared about. And my sister, I remember about 15 years ago we were around having a few drinks and we started asking each other questions like, 'when the flash car comes around why do we always have to run to these houses?' I mean it was just normal practice in our lives. We all had safe houses but we weren't allowed to go to the same house. We had to go to different houses. That was to improve the odds – so if one was taken they wouldn't take all of us. So we all had our own house that we had to go to when the flash cars come. Everyone had to do this while growing up. That's just the way it was. It was! And it wasn't until I actually got older and lived here, and I still remember the day when I went to a café on 6th avenue in Maroochydore with 2 girlfriends, two Murri girls. I dropped them off, I went to park the car, I walked in with them and I said 'have you ordered' and they said 'no'. A man came out and asked me straight up 'what did you want' and I said 'did you see them here' and he said 'no, I didn't know they were here' I said 'they've been standing here for 10 minutes' and the girls just wanted to punch his lights out. I said 'come one girls' and we walked out. So it still happens, even in our 50s.*

(Nambour)

Part of being resilient for the women was simply disregarding any negative perceptions or comments and simply going on with one's life.

*I don't care what people think of me now because it doesn't gel with me anymore, it doesn't worry me anymore. I could walk down the street there and don't give a hoot. If anybody went "look at that old, black, grey headed thing down there" it doesn't worry me.* (Gympie)

This message was also shared with younger generations as a means for building resilience.

*I said to him 'one day you will have to step back, not say a word and just ignore it. There's times and places where you say your piece and then you just walk away. If someone's standing there calling you a black nigger, sometimes you've just got to turn around and walk away and say 'yeah, keep going mate.'* (Gympie)

*My kids are so proud of me. My son would walk down the main street and he'd walk down with his arm around you. He wouldn't care what people thought. If you give them the love you'll get the love back, so it doesn't matter what anyone else says, it's how your kids and your friends think of you as a person. Be proud of who you are.* (Gympie)

Being resilient, although not easy, allowed the women and those around them to focus on the strengths of their culture and Indigenous identity.

### 3.3 Cultural Identity

From the women's narrative it was clear that their very strong sense of cultural identity was deeply connected to the resilience. In spite of the long history of prejudice, which may have resulted in some cultural disconnections, the women also spoke of reconnections that we argue gave them an over-arching and powerful sense of cultural pride. Irrespective of having, or not having, comprehensive knowledge of language, traditional practices or having studied about one's culture all the women indicated that they, their families and communities had a deep and powerful sense of cultural pride. The following was reiterated by all the women in all focus groups; *I love being an Aboriginal woman, I'm glad I am.* (Nambour)

However, the destruction of Indigenous cultures as described by the women created disconnection from their culture and history.

*Aboriginal people used to gather to story-tell. That was how our culture was passed on. That's how our bloodlines were passed on, our Dreaming, everything was passed by sitting in groups and talk.* (Nambour)

*A lot of times I do, sometimes I feel a loss, particularly with the loss of language and we've only got words here and there, bits and pieces, not flowing. So I feel lost there...* (Maroochydore)

Although the women try to pass their culture to their children doing so can be difficult when language and storytelling was taken from their ancestors.

*Yeah. I mean we talk about the indigenous stuff at home and stuff like that. Throw everything on the table whatever. We teach the grandkids only the words that we know and the song that my mum used to sing to me I now sing to my kids but I used to know the meaning but now I can't remember what it is.* (Maroochydore)

*If you don't have that conversation about it, it gets ... Yeah. It gets lost so now I have to go back to mum and ask her about that. But because there's a lot of things getting lost but my granddaughter at two and a half she walks around singing* (Maroochydore)

*My grandson was "ask nan what her totem is". I don't know. Do you know?* (Gympie)

Whilst disconnection is an issue many young people seek to reconnect with their culture and share it with the world. One woman in Gympie expressed the following about her son:

*He went over to the States about 18 years ago to run an indigenous art gallery. He tells me more than what I know about the Indigenous people of Australia.* (Gympie)

For some young people, however, the thought of engaging in certain traditional practices was out of the question.

*When M was pregnant and I would say to her "I know a place at the back of Nambour wherever it was, do you want to go and have a look, it's the birthing pools" and she's just like "no". So there's that loss of that connection. Yeah.* (Maroochydore)

The women also noted that despite their efforts cultural disconnection was sometimes reinforced by external sources.

*My mother doesn't say a lot either but we know that when my brother was born that she was living out in the Aboriginal community at La Perouse and she took them to the doctors and the doctor told her to get the children out of the community. (Maroochydhore)*

*Because the rest of the school was not taught about the indigenous culture. My boy would come home from school and go "what I have got to learn this crap for, why am I doing Spanish, why am I doing French". He'd be swearing at me "where the hell is the indigenous side of it". It's not there and that's what makes the non-Indigenous cultures and people not respect the Indigenous stuff because it's lost and they're just hitching on something else. Ignorance. (Maroochydhore)*

In order to promote resilience, the provision of services and developing a deep connection with one's Indigenous identity was central to cultural and personal health of generations to come. One such service is referred to as Link-Up (<http://www.link-upqld.org.au/>), a family tracing and reunion service that supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The participant below refers to the importance of Link-Up in the role of enabling other families to find their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity.

*I put them in contact with Link-Up and it's important for them to actually explore their Aboriginality because it's their own spiritual journey and that's their foundation of who they are and it's very important and to move forward. But also even being fair skinned if you own your identity, you know who you are, that's it, you've got a strong foundation, you won't fall over when you come to a confrontation like that in the community. You look at health its holistic, health is more than just physical, it's everything and it's that spirituality that is very important and I find that my main role is actually for them to explore their own Aboriginal identity. (Maroochydhore)*

*We've got to praise ourselves, we've got to love ourselves, that's the biggest thing for us. Pull ourselves up and say that 'We're just as good as any other person out there'. (Nambour)*

The women emphasized the impact of such connections to different services, such as Link-Up, as a means to enhance cultural experiences and identity which they felt strengthened their characters.

*I think we're blessed in that we did so much and were taught so much as children that other children don't from White cultures didn't get taught. Our spirituality has become stronger and I think that's where our core values are and I think that goes...I do believe, just looking at my own people, I do believe that Aboriginal people are very humble people, very caring people traditionally... (Nambour)*

#### 4. Discussion

In line with the aims of this paper the women's voices have highlighted the challenges of being Indigenous women in White Australia. This investigation was necessary as it addresses an integral aspect of Indigenous women's wellbeing; namely, the role of (cross)cultural understandings and the evolving nature of Indigeneity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Doing so can inform the relevance of these concepts for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women ageing in Australia and highlights the appropriateness of current policy and service delivery in contemporary Australia. The findings also reinforce the importance of Indigenous forms of resilience as an important and integral aspect of the Indigenous experience in Australia. Notably, the data presented above not only shows the central role that Indigenous women play in their families and communities for the maintenance of these communities and of Indigenous cultures, it also demonstrates their resilience in the face of severe challenges associated with colonisation and living in a white-centric world.

This research, and the women who took part, reiterate that a focus on resilience within Indigenous Australian groups is more significant for social change as it moves away from deficit-discourses about Indigenous groups. Further, it highlights their remarkable strengths in adapting, recovering and continuing in white-centric, antagonistic conditions. The research has identified barriers to expressions of Indigenous resilience, an important step for strengthening Indigenous self-determination and empowerment. We would therefore argue that focusing on Indigenous resilience and agency is important for community-led interventions, a fundamental building block for effectively decolonizing practices that propagate Indigenous disadvantage.

A limitation of our study here has been that we have not been able to engage discussions of *how* indigenous women develop resilience - perhaps because indigenous resilience was not the explicit focus of the broader study. As such more research is needed on Indigenous resilience in Australia - with a particular focus on Indigenous women given their centrality in their families and communities - to developing contextually relevant definitions and nuanced understandings of indigenous resilience.

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